

The Verbal Complex from Middle High German to Modern German

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1. Introduction

Unlike Modern Standard German, with its fixed word orders within the verbal complex, earlier stages of German and some contemporary dialects have variable order. For example, with two-verb complexes, Middle High German (MHG) has the 2-1 order (1) like Standard German, the 1-2 or VR order (2), and the VPR order (3).

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|-----|---|--------------------------------------|
| (1) | wi er daz volk verflvchet. daz got gefegent het.
how he the people cursed, REL God blessed ^{PPP} had ^{fin}
'(How he cursed the people) whom God had blessed.' | MHG
<i>(Buch der Könige 04va)</i> |
| (2) | alle die den got gewalt un geriht hat verlihen.
all those REL God power and rule has ^{fin} granted ^{PPP}
'(... all those) whom God has granted power and rule.' | MHG
<i>(Buch der Könige 05ra)</i> |
| (3) | daz dv vnf vergaebest swaz wir vbelf heten an dir getan.
that you us forgive REL we evil had ^{fin} to you done ^{PPP}
'(...that you forgive us for) whatever evil we had done to you.' | MHG
<i>(Buch der Könige 03va)</i> |

Concentrating on two-verb complexes in subordinate clauses, this paper investigates these orders in several stages of the language. Data for MHG and Early New High German (ENHG) come from large corpus studies (1,133 and 2,921 clauses, respectively), using *Goldvarb X* to test the effect of 21 linguistic variables on verb order. Data for contemporary varieties of German come from questionnaire-based studies, with the most extensive study being of the Zurich dialect.

2. Results

These studies identify a number of morpho-syntactic factors that favor particular word orders. First, as is well known from many other West Germanic varieties, syntagm plays an important role, with the modal-infinitive construction favoring the 1-2 order while syntagms with a participle favor 2-1. In MHG, a stressed word preceding the verb complex favors the 1-2 order, as in Ebert's (1981) study of ENHG; however, I find no such effect in my ENHG corpus. Both my MHG and ENHG findings do agree with Ebert's (1981) in that clauses with extraposition favor 1-2; however, extraposition has become marginal in contemporary dialects and thus no longer affects verb order. Most interestingly, focus has an effect on word order within the verbal complex both in historical stages of German and in some contemporary dialects: although the details differ somewhat in different varieties, wider focus favors the 2-1 order, while focus on e.g. a direct object tends to favor 1-2.

Turning to sociolinguistic variables, the rate of the different orders varies in the historical corpora by genre, with chancery documents (the most formal text type represented) favoring the 2-1 order, which eventually becomes standard, while sermons (the least formal texts in the corpus) favor 1-2. There is also considerable dialectal variation in MHG and ENHG, although in nearly all dialects the 1-2 order declines with each successive century.

3. Analysis

Lehman (1971) argues that the trend toward the 2-1 order in the history of German is part of a typological change from SVO to SOV, following Greenberg's (1966) universal that SOV languages are 2-1. Indeed, Ebert (1981) shows that in ENHG there is a correlation between the increase in the number of verb-final clauses and the increase in the frequency of the 2-1 order.

However, there are some problems with such an argument. First, at no attested stage of German were the 'VO' and 1-2 orders particularly frequent, and although significant, the correlation between the two is not especially strong in my historical corpora. Secondly, contemporary West

Germanic varieties such as Swiss German do not allow objects to occur after the verb and yet continue to show variation within the verbal complex. Finally, the apparent VO orders in early stages of German are derived: according to the criteria in Kroch & Taylor (2000), MHG and ENHG are OV languages with extraposition of heavy/focused XPs (as in Bies 1996).

The 2-1 and 1-2 orders coexisted for centuries, subject to morphological, syntactic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic conditions, with the eventual loss of 1-2 in most varieties a result of “change from above” as argued by Ebert (1981). This variation appears not to be a result of parametric change nor of some deeper syntactic principle, but is perhaps best treated as a post-syntactic operation (as in Wurmbrand 2004) or, like Haider & Rosengren’s (2003) analysis of scrambling, as syntactic movement that is accessible at the interface with pragmatics. This would help account for the loose correlation between focus and certain verb orders: some orders are preferred in contexts where they help disambiguate the focus interpretation. Using Uriagereka’s (2004) terminology, the operation that derives the 1-2 order is a microparameter at the periphery of grammar, thus is accessible to the kind of sociolinguistic pressure and conscious manipulation that resulted in the eventual fixing of 2-1 as the only possible order in Standard German.

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